On Fears and Boundaries

By *Christos Asteriou*

Translated from the German by *Sinéad Crowe*

I was recently giving an online lecture at the Freie Universität Berlin when, without notifying anyone or asking for permission, one of my students lit up a cigarette. Even though he was watching the lecture at home on his computer, a flurry of comments appeared in the chat: 'Is it okay to do that in public?' 'Are you allowed to smoke during lectures?' Several students were scandalised by the sight of a peer smoking, and the fact that no one was being exposed to passive smoke didn't seem to dampen their indignation.

I don't smoke myself, but as I've been working on a story about the history of an old tobacco factory for three years now, my students' outrage gave me pause for thought. I began to worry that my story could be interpreted as a manifesto for smoking. I brooded over the possibility that my work's literary merits would be ignored and that it would be refused publication purely because of its subject matter. My fears only deepened when I discovered German TV series now tend to avoid showing main characters smoking. Have we reached the point where editors will advise authors to avoid topics that might upset their readers? Or where they turn down translation pitches of texts that cross the boundary of what they consider acceptable?

There has been some discussion recently about whether authors and translators ought to prove 'legitimacy' when it comes to representing certain themes. One view is that we can only write or translate a 'sensitive' text if we ourselves have had the experiences portrayed. Having recently completed my translation of Clemens Setz's collection of short stories *Der Trost runder Dinge* (*The Comfort of Round Things),* which includes a depiction of a panic attack, I can't say that having this type of 'legitimacy' somehow helped me. I have indeed experienced a panic attack, but this had a negligible effect on my translation.

Is it legitimate for writers and translators to work on texts about countries they have never visited? In our technological era, is first-hand experience still important? The answer to these questions has been provided many times over the course of literary history. Take, for example, Friedrich Schiller's *Brief eines reisenden Dänen* (*Letter from a Danish Traveller*, 1785), which describes a collection of plaster casts of Greek and Italian sculptures that the author visited several times during his two-year stay in Mannheim. The young Schiller champions the Mannheim plaster casts over the Italian marble originals, claiming that the spatial arrangement of the former, the ease with which the visitor can move around the exhibition hall, and the meticulous lighting all help the curious scholar study these works in detail. In contrast to the 'sentimental' Schiller, the 'naïve' Goethe, who had visited the Mannheim collection when he was just 20 years old, ventured southwards. It need hardly be pointed out that these two titans of German classicism took very different approaches: one studied ancient art from a certain distance, while the other got as physically close to the artworks as was possible. One could argue that both approaches are still legitimate today. Experiencing

an object first-hand certainly doesn’t guarantee better results. Many of the writers who flocked to Lesbos to witness the unfolding migrant drama at first hand produced highly topical but ultimately mediocre novels. The American author Anthony Marra, in contrast, wrote an outstanding novel about Chechnya without having ever been there. What matters in the end are the results and the power of the writer’s pen.



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Christos Asteriou lives in Berlin, where he works as a writer, translator and university instructor. He has translated the work of writers such as Christa Wolf, Hans Georg Gadamer, Carolin Emcke and Clemens Setz into Greek.

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